A Profile of a Teacher with Significant Change and Actions integrated with Thinking[1]

Background

Meg worked during the day as a family literacy teacher and taught a three-hour ESOL class once a week in the evening. She held one of the only two full-time teaching positions at the local adult education center located in the high school of a rural community where the main livelihoods include logging and farming. The program had two components: during the day, there was a family literacy component with a small mostly full-time staff of five; in the evening, there was an ABE/ESOL and vocational education program component with approximately 30 part-time teachers. The day and evening classes, although located in the same program, were separate and markedly different in structure and policies, but their philosophy of adult basic education was similar. Literacy was, according to the director, considered to be more than the acquisition of basic skills:

> *Literacy…we see that it's a lot more than reading or writing. We see it more as a broad-based opportunity for skills enhancement across core areas and extending into the family and focusing on people's roles as citizens and community members as well.*

At the time that we met Meg, she had been teaching in adult education for five years. Like other teachers in our study, Meg began teaching in adult education with the hope that she would eventually make her way into the K-12 system. With a bachelor's degree and virtually all her prior teaching experience in early childhood education, she had not intended to stay in adult education until she became "hooked":

> *But then when I started working with families and seeing how intensive and how much need is there for teachers to help adults to get the education, I decided to stay. So at the beginning it was just a position and then it started to become more personal.*

Classroom

Meg came into the staff development with a belief in "learner-centered" teaching and providing students with a sense of ownership of her class:

> S*ometimes maybe it's a good idea to have students have ownership of their classroom instead of just having a structured planning framework. Have them take ownership and I become the facilitator instead of the teacher…I've always*

[1] **NCSALL-Draft, Do Not Copy or Distribute.** Data from the study *"How Teachers Change: A Study of Professional Development in Adult Education"* (Smith et al, 2003), a publication by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy.

been really looking towards what the students want instead of just going with the curriculum.

For Meg, a learner-centered approach entailed providing students with a say in how activities were organized and supplementing her use of a set curriculum with materials based on students' interests:

For example, if we're discussing in a large group and one of the students suggests to divide the group so they can have a smaller group whereas I thought the large group will be efficient and would be a better way, I just scrap it and say, "OK, so the next time, I'll just put them in small groups.

As Meg was born and raised in the same community as the majority of students with whom she worked, she felt she could readily understand and relate to students' concerns. She essentially saw herself on par with learners and tended to apply insights she gained about herself to learners, and vice-versa, insights gained about learners she applied to her own self. She held some reservations, however, for bringing students' personal lives into the ESOL classroom:

if a learner chose to bring their lives in the classroom, some of it I know has to happen…I think if learners choose to bring, to a certain extent, their personal lives in the classroom, that's OK. But as a teacher, we need to come up with the terms or draw the line where it should stop.

Her discomfort seemed largely informed by the structure of and expectations for classroom-based instruction, for when she moved into learners' homes as part of her family literacy job, Meg was much more appreciative of the benefit to her teaching of better knowing learners:

By going into their homes, it makes it easier for me to understand where they're coming from. Seeing where they live and how they live and what barriers they have in their lives makes me try to make the classroom into a different environment.

Program and System

Meg was one of the very few teachers in the adult education center to work in both the family literacy (day program) and ABE/ESOL (evening program), affording her a unique perspective on the quite dramatic differences in working conditions and service delivery between them. Students and staff in the Even Start program had their own classroom and meeting space, which, according to Meg, made a positive difference to her teaching:

it makes a big difference 'cause during the day it's my classroom and I have all the resources I need there…and it's a more comfortable setting.

In comparison, the evening ESOL class "borrowed" space from the high school and had to return everything as it was for the day class.

The amount of overall support and opportunity teachers received to participate in staff development, meet with one another to share ideas, and have input into program decision-making was quite substantial for the Even Start staff who were full-time, and quite weak for the ABE/ESOL teachers, many of whom were very part time. As a family literacy teacher, Meg received paid release time to attend a great deal of professional development, including trainings directed at K-12 teachers.

In contrast, the teachers in the evening ABE/ESOL program, met only two times per semester to discuss administrative issues. No time was allocated for these teachers to talk about their teaching concerns or provide input into program decision-making. Many of these teachers, including Meg, did not even know one another. Had it not been for the NCSALL staff development, Meg reflected she would not have met a new colleague:

> *I would never have met him because I probably would have seen him in the hall and said hi but that basically would have been it…this is his first year in adult ed. This (the mentor teacher group) gave him a great support system…. …It made a big difference (in keeping him in the field).*

The one exception to the relative inequity in the amount of resources and support across the two programs was the director's active involvement with teachers. Unlike many directors in our study who were hands-off and essentially unaware of teachers' practices, Meg's director *makes it a point to really find out what's happening in the classroom.*

He did classroom observations each semester, conducted annual reviews of teachers' performance, told teachers on an on-going basis both the good qualities they possessed and what needed to be improved, and asked teachers what they would be doing each week, even looking at their lesson plans.

<u>The Mentor Teacher Group Experience: The Right Thing at the Right Time</u>

Meg participated for the full 18 hours in a mentor teacher group. The other four teachers in the group were also from her program and the entire group completed the staff development. The mentor was a teacher from another part of the state.

Meg identified five key aspects of the professional development that supported her to learn.

1. <u>Participants were all teachers from the same program, (and all from the evening component) marking the first time teachers had the chance to share ideas about issues important to them:</u>

For Meg, the most important aspect of the NCSALL mentor teacher group to her own growth was that it marked the first time that the evening teachers had the chance to meet together for an extended period of time:

> *This was so new to us, we were able to talk as a group. We were able to turn around and voice our opinions to try to do something… Whereas otherwise, we would have felt lonely, wouldn't (have) been able to do that. It was so exciting to be together and being able to voice our issues and just have a session where, 'This is what I'm going through and what should I do?'…*

2. <u>The facilitator was a teacher</u>:

> *She understood where we were coming from and why it was so important to us to have these different sessions. So that made a big difference for me. And for the others in the group.*

3. <u>The staff development model allowed time for teachers to talk</u>:

Although the audiotapes from this staff development indicate that the facilitator adhered quite closely to the model that the researchers had designed, Meg felt the facilitator had in fact created the space for her and her colleagues to discuss important issues:

> *She gave us the time to do that (talk about those things that we really wanted to talk about). Whatever we wanted to do. With how we wanted to do it. She made it our staff development.*

4. <u>The observation component provided MO with the nudge to try something new:</u>

Meg found that the one-on-one mentoring component provided her with the added incentive to try something new. Simply having an outsider come to view her teaching provided her with the added inspiration to "step up to the plate" and more thoroughly prepare, try something new and do her best.

> *I wanted to and I had all intentions in changing my teaching techniques… but it was like, 'OK, I can do this maybe next semester.' Going through the NCSALL workshops…I realized now's the time…*

She realized that had she participated in a training and received the same ideas, it was very likely that she would not have acted upon them. The ideas would have sat in a pile of other good ideas on her desk.

5. <u>Teachers in the same program worked collectively on program change:</u>

Responding to the desire of the group, the mentor teacher arranged for the final observation to be a time for the group to collectively plan a persistence intervention for their program, rather than a time for a second-round of individual observation and

feedback sessions. Having the opportunity to collectively work on an issue made a positive difference in the teachers' enthusiasm and ability to address the issue of learner motivation, retention, and persistence:

> *Because we were so excited about how different ideas were accumulating we just said, 'OK, if we're going to do this we might as well do it as a group.'.. It was like we were starting to feel like a team. So we wanted to do things as a team. It made the world of difference to all of us...Having it (the staff development) all within the same program, that whatever program change we needed to do we could do as a group, I thought that was very significant.*

Her Changes: Activism in the Class, Program, and Field

Meg's outcomes were numerous and profound, transforming the way she viewed herself, her classroom practice, her program, and the field.

She became more of an activist, championing the rights of teachers to have better working conditions, and students to have a greater say in their classroom and programs to ensure better quality of service. Her main thinking outcomes seem to boil down to three broad concepts, each so evocative to inspire a host of related actions and thoughts.

Concept One: Meg realized that teachers and programs need to listen more to learners and better meet their needs. This led her to take a number of actions on both the classroom and program levels.

In both her final interview and questionnaire, Meg told us that the most important thing she learned from the staff development was the need for teachers to listen more attentively to learners:

> *First and most important would be to let learners have a voice in the classroom. ...It is their classroom and they're the ones who know what they want to learn. Try to stay out of the curriculum, well, not the curriculum per say, but textbooks…for the teacher to really listen.*
>
> *(The staff development) made me realize that students should be able to have the last administrative word on how they should learn and what is important to them, not being told what is best for them.*

She added, that not only teachers, but administrators, too, need to better listen and respond to what they have heard:

> *But it's not only us as teachers, it's the program also. The program needs to be a program where learners would want to stay….Yes, teachers can motivate students… But programs also need to make it attractive to learners.*

Following the recommendation of the staff development, Meg conducted a force-field analysis for her first observation with her mentor teacher, asking students about the forces affecting their persistence. For the first time, she asked students to consider not only what they could do to better meet their needs, but more important, what she could do:

> *but this time we switched it and said what can I do to make it better and I want your help in that and that made the change.*

Having been surprised to hear new information about students' concerns, Meg realized that she had not been as "learner-centered" as she had thought. She saw that she had been focusing on students' language acquisition needs, not the much broader range of needs of the whole person:

> *I was concentrating on their language proficiency more than their individual personal needs.*
>
> *I think it (my teaching) has shifted to this point (of taking learners' needs more into account) because of that staff development. If I wouldn't have asked the students what they wanted to learn, I would have continued doing it more teacher-directed.*

The action (force-field analysis) led to an insight (she was not as learner-centered as she had hoped) that led to further action. She approached her director and was able to change the class schedule in response to learners' requests, to meet two evenings per week versus just once a week as they had been. She also was able to convince her director to purchase a new curriculum, Crossroads Café, that she promptly began to use, in response to learners' desire to have more class interaction.

The process, already initiated, of eliciting and responding to students' interests and needs, continued to evolve, leading Meg to further actions and insights. As a way to hear more from learners, she added evaluation journal and reflection time to the end of each class. She also continued to directly ask learners during class about changes they would like to see in the classroom:

> *That's part of the questions (i.e., what can I do to support your persistence) that I decided that I was going to ask since that staff development. I would make sure that I would make it a point to ask that question to learners. Because if you don't ask the question, they're not going to tell you.*

Meg began to supplement her curriculum with project based learning activities, well on her way to transforming her workbook-driven practice to a project-based practice that integrated the learning of skills with issues important to students. In her family literacy class, Meg supported students to create a newsletter for parents; in her evening ESOL class, she helped students create a recruitment flyer to attract new students. Meg explained that while prior to the staff development, she would have planned a lesson on

verbs or another form of grammar, she now (by the third interview) involved students in projects important to them that called on the development of a number of skills:

> *If they're going to voice their opinions, well then, they have to type and organize what they're going to say. They get the writing skills. They get the organizational skills and the outlining skills. We have created a newsletter during the day for parents, for the day students…It's not only one particular skill that I'm teaching different… They didn't want to watch the video so I said, 'OK, then let's go in our circle. Let's have an open discussion.' Come to find out they wanted more people in the classroom. So we developed an ad that they could put in the local stores.*

Meg's on-going reflection on the changes she was implementing led her to an entirely new set of questions about her practice. She pondered the new boundary of including students' personal lives into classroom instruction and questioned the extent to which students were learning language skills as she moved towards project based learning.

Meg's commitment to better respond to students' concerns carried her involvement with students to a program level. Having heard about their desire for programmatic improvements, Meg became a student advocate, twice supporting students to directly take their concerns to the director, once to recommend a change in program-wide scheduling of classes, and in another instance, to press for improved classroom space:

> *I started to have students voice their opinions to administrators more….The issue would come up into the classroom, we discuss them, but they stayed there, there wasn't a follow up. There wasn't a method to change whatever they wanted to see changed. I explained to them, 'I can do just so much in the classroom to change my classroom. But there's still policy. So I think that maybe you as learners should voice your opinions and say, 'Hey, listen, this is not working out for us. What can we change? How can we change it?'*

Having come to see the effectiveness of teachers working collectively for change (another outcome of the staff development), Meg taught students this same strategy to help them overcome their fear of speaking up:

> *No wonder learners are giving up. No wonder they're afraid to go talk to administrators when teachers are even afraid to follow up on their issues. So I encouraged them that within the group you can do so many things inside the same issues….if you go as a group and you stick together.*

Shortly after the staff development ended, Meg told us that she wanted to start a student support group, having experienced the power of participating in a support group made up of her own colleagues.

> *The thing that I would definitely now like to see is a support group for learners and each program should provide that, especially now more than ever.*

One year later, she had just begun a group in her family literacy class:

> *I put a block from 8 to 8:30 on the specific day we have students' support group, where they come together. They just talk about anything they want to do or anything that they need to learn.*

Concept Two: Many teachers in her program and the field share the same need for better working conditions.

Meg entered the staff development questioning whether she was the only teacher in her program concerned about their working conditions:

> *Before (the staff development), it was like, 'OK, this is what I think should be changed, but am I the only one feeling this way?'*

Through discussions in the staff development with her evening ABE colleagues about issues important to them, Meg learned that she was not alone in her frustrations:

> *I started talking to other teachers, started to hear that they're discouraged, they're not motivated. They're thinking of leaving.*

Meg became interested in investigating teachers' working conditions in programs throughout the state. Given her high access to staff development and frequent interactions with colleagues in other programs, Meg was able to informally survey teachers and directors about teachers' working conditions and talk with them about her concerns:

> *So then I thought if that (teachers' leaving the program due to poor working conditions) is happening within my program, within our program, then I'm sure it's happening within others… Then when I went to conferences, I started asking different questions to different teachers, as well as administrators. The same problem arose. We have teachers leaving that are good teachers and they're not staying in the program.*

Rather than surrender to the sad state of affairs, however, Meg realized that the conditions needed to change:

> *the more I was searching, research, the more I'd say, 'Ah, I want to stay in the program, in adult ed.' Then I figured if there's problems in all adult education programs statewide with teachers' motivation, retention and persistence, something has to happen.*

Concept Three: She realized that teachers' needs must be met if learners' needs are to be met.

Meg came to realize that learners and teachers' realities were far more intertwined than she had previously considered. She made the insightful connection between teachers' motivation, retention, and persistence and that of learners, seeing that teachers cannot meet the needs of learners unless teachers' own needs are met:

> *Because if the teacher's not motivated, then learners will not be. That's what we came to realize is that we need to do something to make sure the teacher is motivated…(Teacher) retention is also a problem, and teacher persistence. So that is what we came to realize is that, if we don't have all three, then our students will not.*
>
> *…. as a teacher, we are always looking toward making sure that learners needs are met. I can't do that if my needs are not met…. If my needs aren't met, then I won't be able to meet the students' needs.*

Conditions she had once tolerated, she began to challenge. For example, prior to the staff development, Meg simply coped with not being able to use the blackboard; one year later she realized that ABE teachers have the right to have access not only to blackboards but to the full range of resources in the classroom available to K-12 teachers:

> *I use her classroom at night. It has all kinds of notes written on the board and I can't use the board because I can't erase the notes…At the time it was something that I was just dealing with because I didn't really have a choice. But now I'm saying, 'Yes, I do have a choice here because I do a lot of writing on the board'…, whatever rooms the night school teachers (the ABE/ESOL teachers) are using, they should have access to all resources in the classroom.*

Again, insight led to action with Meg shouldering increasing responsibility for supporting her colleagues and advocating for teachers' rights.

> *(the staff development) has really enhanced my learning different ways of being supportive not only to my students but also to my peers…*
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> *If I'm going to teach students to voice their opinions and to make changes, I need to do it also. Because I think going back and reflecting on that staff development, how things could be, if only I would say what I needed.*

Her first step was to join efforts with her colleagues in the staff development to press the director to institute regular teacher meetings, which was met with success:

> *We (the teachers in the staff development) couldn't meet the director as a group because of our teaching schedules so each and every one of us went in our different times and said, "Look this is what we're interested in. How can you make this happen?" …And he said, "Hey this is great." So we meet every Friday once a month….He's paying us and providing this on our time.*

She then realized how essential this support was to her own sustenance as a teacher:

> *I never realized that support was important because I was too busy with my students. Now that I received it and I know it's there, I don't think I want to go without it any more.*

When encouraging other teachers to join her in her efforts, Meg became aware that her colleagues were reluctant to voice their concerns for fear of losing their jobs, making her conscious of both the risks involved in challenging the status quo and the absence in the adult basic education field of a teachers' advocacy organization:

> *It's this perception that you as an individual have no right to say or voice your opinion… there's nothing as far as...any type of support for teachers or like an organization or a union or anything. There's nobody there to support this individual, to say it's OK to voice your opinions…(to say) that their fear of losing their position is a reality. It does happen.*

By the last time we spoke with her, Meg had become convinced that a successful program was one that listened to and met the needs of not only students, but also teachers:

> *I think they (teachers) should have a very important role. A lot more than they do have. Program directors need to really listen and provide teachers with an environment that is positive for them as well as their learners.*

Conclusion

By our final conversation with Meg, she had become increasingly disillusioned with the prospect of improved working conditions and increasingly blamed program administration for not listening more to teachers and not advocating more for teachers' needs. We do not know if Meg decided to leave the field or to continue to struggle for improvements. On the one hand she told us she was discouraged:

> *They (teachers) want to make a difference within programs, but it's like nobody's listening. It's a great idea at the time, but it takes too long to make the changes…*
>
> *Lately I've been feeling that I definitely am not getting paid enough for what I'm doing. Finances is an issue, wages is an issue. So basically it is just going out and finding a better job that pays more.*

And yet on the other hand, some of her final words to us, when reflecting on her own strengths as a professional in this field, evoked her continued determination to press for change and challenge the system, rather than leave:

Liking and caring about my job. I think that is the most important strength that I have because I think what has changed over time is my wanting to meet not only learners' needs but trying to meet my needs as a teacher.